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ABSTRACT

This document describes women college students' perceptions of their experiences as student assistants (SAs) in a writing/reading/study skills center. To examine changes in the student assistants' perceptions of their growth, investigators compared two samples of their writing: reflective essays written before the SAs attended orientation or worked in the position, and reflective essays written after they had worked for a year in the center. Eight goals/themes emerged from a content analysis of the initial essays. Four kinds of goals were expressed: social-interpersonal, caring, educational, and vocational. The concerns expressed by these women were categorized into interpersonal/relational, doubting knowledge, doubting skills, and responsibility toward the center. Excerpts from student writings were presented to illustrate both goals and concerns. Caring and empowerment were two major themes which emerged from the final essays at the end of a year's work in the center. Student assistants developed perspectives of themselves as relational leaders who felt connected to the students they assisted and connected to the center. They had a sense of caring and responsibility for listening well, for making decisions about what to teach, and for deciding where to begin. The cooperative atmosphere reported seemed also to stimulate the client students' confidence in learning and the student assistants' personal confidence as well. (GEA)

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Making Connections: Developing Leadership among Women in College

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Making connections: Developing leadership among women in college

The purpose of this talk is to describe women college students' perceptions of their experiences as student assistants in a writing/reading/study skills center. Student assistants are like peer tutors, in that they are getting paid to academically help their peers. They are unlike peer tutors, however, in their primary purpose: Their task is not to assist the teacher in tutoring students having difficulty, but rather to assist the student in whatever the student and the student assistant assess is important to do. This shifts the power from teacher to students. Theoretically, then, the talk that arises between a student and a student assistant can be more student-centered compared to the talk of peer tutors, which tends to be teacher centered, or at a minimum--structured around a teachers' agenda. Paulo Friere describes the traditional view of education using a banking metaphor: the teacher's role is to fill students with deposits of knowledge. The peer tutor within this traditional system would be assisting the teacher in filling up a peer's head.

In contrast, the helping metaphor that would most accurately describe the context of this study would be the student assistant as midwife (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). Instead of depositing knowledge in the

learner's head, the midwife's task is to draw it out--to assist students in giving birth to their ideas--to focus on students' knowledge, development and concerns--to shape natural growth.

The philosophy given to student assistants during their orientation was summed up in a quote from anonymous: "The greatest good we can do for others is not just to share our riches with them, but to reveal their riches to themselves." This researcher and the professional staff at the center believe that good leadership and pedagogy involves empowering women by assisting them in learning more about themselves and their capabilities. This study describes how student assistants trained under this philosophy perceived themselves to grow socially, relationally, and intellectually.

The title of this talk is "Making connections", because two major themes concerning connection emerged in this study of college women: 1) the importance of establishing relationships before beginning collaborative academic work, and 2) the student assistants' view of themselves as empowerers--as leaders who were sharing power with those they were assisting and feeling empowered as they empowered others.

Setting of the Study

This study took place in the writing/reading/study center in a small Catholic women's liberal arts college in the midwest. The center assisted a little less than

one-third of the students enrolled in the college; these students were primarily undergraduates, and about one-third of them were freshmen. Half of the clientele were enrolled in an English class; the other half were taking courses in other departments. The students dropped in the center for a variety of reasons: to discuss a paper they were writing, a speech they were preparing or questions they had about studying or doing an assignment for a particular course. The role of the student assistant was to assist the student in the process of thinking, writing, speaking or learning.

The Participants

The center was staffed by a director, a writing coordinator, a study skills coordinator and 14 student assistants. The student assistants were gifted undergraduates (mostly upperclass students) who were carefully selected through a process of faculty recommendations, writing tests, paper samples and an interview. The position offered minimum wage, some prestige and a great deal of responsibility.

All student assistants were required to attend a three-day summer orientation at a lake place in northern Minnesota. The purpose of the orientation was to discuss the philosophy, functions and procedures of the center, and to help the student assistants (S.A.s) develop a sense of community. The staff viewed the S.A.'s sense of community and trust in each other as resources essential to their development. The staff wanted the S.A.s to rely on each

other, not just on the three professional staff in the center. Training continued bi-monthly throughout the year, focusing on topics the student assistants selected for discussion.

Procedure

To examine changes in student assistants' perceptions of their growth, we compared two samples of their writing: reflective essays written before the S.A.s attended orientation or worked in the position, and reflective essays written after they'd worked for a year in the center.

In the first essay, student assistants were asked to write the staff a letter, telling them why they wanted to be a student assistant and describing any goals or concerns they might have about the position. At the end of the year, student assistants were asked to write a second letter reflecting on their past experiences as a student assistant.

Results

Initial Goals and Concerns

Eight themes emerged from a content analysis of these first letters. These themes, illustrated in Table 1, are grouped into the four goals and the four concerns expressed by the student assistants prior to beginning their work.

Goals. Four kinds of goals were expressed in the student assistants' letters: social-interpersonal, caring, educational, and vocational.

Responses were coded as containing a social goal if

they included liking others, liking to talk, wanting to be part of the learning center staff and wanting to be more a part of the college community.

A caring sort of goal was attached to responses which showed caring and a sense of responsibility towards others. Student assistants wrote that they wanted to help other women find their "voices" through writing, improve their writing skills, and develop their sense of confidence. As one woman wrote,

"My main goal is to help each woman find her own means of expression. This will increase her confidence in writing and in herself."

Some also mentioned that they had received help theselves and wanted to give help back, or wanted others to experience some of the feelings they had felt, for example:

> I believe that to become a Writing Assistant one must either love writing and wish to instill that love in others or one must enjoy torture and wish to help others to enjoy self-torture. For myself, I feel it is a combination of the two--a macabre joy in the anguish of writing and revision that accompanies improvement and the incredible joy and pride I find in the finished product. I don't know if this feeling is common to all writers, but, I find that the more painful the revision the better the draft. However, this sensation does tend to confuse the joy in the last draft with the relief of the last draft.

Educational goals included wanting to gain knowledge

from the professional staff and other student assistants, wanting to improve writing, speaking, communication, and/or interpersonal skills, and wanting to develop confidence in themselves. One student assistant described her educational goals in this way:

> As a writing assistant I hope to acquire many fringe benefits besides the sheer joy of helping others to write. My list includes becoming more open with, and less defensive of, my own writing; exploring my ability (or lack there of) to teach; and improving my writing. In addition, I am sure I will learn many things I had not intended, such as, the extent of my patience, my willingness to just supply the answers, and how little I know about writing.

Vocational goals, as illustrated in the above example, were often mentioned in close proximity to educational goals. Vocational goals included wanting the position for experience for a career, wanting to test one's teaching abilities, and wanting help in choosing a major or career.

Thus, these women had varied reasons and goals for wanting to become a student assistant. They also had varied concerns.

Concerns. The concerns expressed by these women were categorized into interpersonal/relational, doubting knowledge, doubting skills, and responsibility toward the Center. The following excerpt illustrates three typical concerns:

> My concerns, or rather fears, are numerous. My

> greatest worries are that after I help someone their paper will have degenerated rather than improved; that at a certain point I will simply tell a person to give up because she has no aptitude for writing; or, horror of horrors, that I will discover that I have no aptitude for writing.

In the above excerpt, the first fear mentioned was categorized as doubting knowledge; the second fear was categorized as interpersonal/relational. The third fear illustrates doubting skills. Some students also mentioned being concerned that they would reflect poorly on the reputation of the learning center; they expected themselves to be "perfect."

Year-end Letters

Caring and empowerment were two major themes which emerged from the student assistants' letters at the end of one school year's work in the center.

Caring. These responses showed that the S.A.'s were receptive to students' needs and feelings (receptive responses), and that the S.A.s were confirming supportive positive attributes of the students (confirmation), or that the student assistants enjoyed the relational aspects of their work (rewards).

Receptive responses were comments that mentioned the importance of making a student comfortable, of respecting the student, of appreciating the diversity within students,

of listening well, and showing empathy. One woman wrote about her receptivity in this way:

> I respect the people who come in for help and feedback because it's something I could never do. Since writing is the most personal of public activities, asking for writing help is a terrifying thing: "Here are my THOUGHTS! RAKE THEM OVER THE COALS, PLEASE!
>
> The Writing/Reading Center seems a buffer zone between students and their professors. As student assistants I think we dole out the acid in lower moles, so to speak, before the professors pour on the criticism--ot to mention the grade--that may really burn.

The above quote reflected a receptive theme, a theme present in sixty (60) per cent of the students' letters.

An equal percentage of the students' letters (60 per cent) also reflected the theme of confirmation. These responses were intended to build students' confidence and enthusiasm, share in the excitement of revision and feel more at ease about problems. As one student assistant wrote,

> In reflecting over the past two semesters, I feel that my strength has been in building confidence, especially in women who have been away from an academic setting for such a long time that they are unsure of their abilities. I have found, generally, that these women are highly motivated and that their basic skills are very good--just rusty. They need someone to tell them that their ideas are sound, their punctuation is

proper, and their writing style is comprehensible.

More importantly, they need to know that they can compete successfully with the traditional-age student. The theme of confirmation is also reflected in the following quote,

> Facilitating brain power is part of my vision for the center--not just to clean up papers but to send people away with something and to make them feel heard and cared about as well as helped.

The theme of feeling rewarded for their work was expressed by an even larger number, 70 per cent, of the student assistants in their letters. They reported feeling a sense of connection to the learning center, to other students, ad to other student assistants with whom they had formed friendships. The following excerpt reflects this perception.

> Being a student assistant is sometimes sort of an ego trip. It is nice to help people, and being a student assistant is great experiece for someone who wants to be a writing teacher, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't get a personal kick out of it, too. At times during this semester I've really felt like trash, and it makes me feel good to know that I might be doing something that someone needs and appreciates.

Reciprocal Empowerment.

Sharing power and empowering others seemed to lead the student assistants to a feeling of being empowered themselves, hence the label, "reciprocal empowerment."

Included in this larger category are several specific activities which the student assistants engaged in, such as modeling, dialogue, developing self-knowledge and self-knowledge, and taking risks.

Modeling involved the student assistants discussing their own approaches to tasks, and teaching students to step back and listen to how their writing sounds. One student assistant indicated modeling this process of distancing, when she wrote:

> I've seen a lot of people in the Center lately who've fried themselves out on a paper: people who can no longer step back far enough from their paper to spot grammar and content problems. I think we in the Center do a lot of "stepping back", though I encourage students who come to the Center to ask roommates and friends to "step back" for them as well.

Engaging in dialogue was also an important activity, as indicated by 50 percent of the student assistants. The purposes of these dialogues included negotiation, probing, paraphrasing and influence (for example, trying to change a students' mind about sexist language or plagerism). As one woman described,

> I think the most helpful service I provided to the students was being a listener and giving them a chance to verbalize their thoughts about assignments to another person. In doing this, students often become more aware of how they needed to focus, what they needed for their purpose or thesis statement, etc. In

other words, by having to clarify their assignments to someone else unfamiliar to the subject, they must have a pretty good understanding of the concept in order to explain it.

The next two activities, increasing self-knowledge and self-cofidence, were written about by 90 percent of the student assistants. Students described improvements in their writing, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and teaching skills. Often increasing self-knowledge was intertwined with increasing self-confidence, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> In looking back over the year, I feel that I have personally gained more than I have been able to help anyone else. First of all, I have gained confidence in my own study skills. It was enlightening to learn that books were actually written about the study techniques which I intuitively used and thought everyone else did, too.

Finally, student assistants reported taking risks, engaging in new activities and challenges. One said she "extended into areas never before tested", and aother reported "initiating and trying new challenges."

Conclusion

Student assistants developed perspectives of themselves as relational leaders who felt connected to the students they assisted and connected to the center. They had a sense of caring and responsibility to listen well, make decisions

about what to teach and where to begin.

Three of the categories which emerged, modeling, dialogue and confirmation, were components of an instructional model based on an ethic of caring described by Nel Noddings (1988). The cooperative atmosphere reported here seemed also to stimulate students' confidence in learning and student assistants' confidence in themselves as well.

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TABLE I

Themes from the Reflective Letters

Time	Initial Letters	
	Goals	Concerns
	Social/Interpersonal	Interpersonal/Relational
	Caring	Doubting Knowledge
	Educational	Doubting Skills
	Vocational	Responsibility toward Center
	Year-End Letters	
	Caring	Reciprocal Empowerment
	Receptive Responses	Modeling
	Confirmation	Dialogue
	Rewards	Self-Knowledge
		Self-Confidence
		Risk-Taking